Connecticut Department of
ENERGY &
ENVIRONMENTAL
PROTECTION

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Public Hearing – February 24, 2022
Energy and Technology Committee

Testimony Submitted by Commissioner Katie S. Dykes

House Bill No. 5116 – AN ACT REQUIRING THE CREATION OF UTILITY COMPANY TREE-PLANTING FUNDS.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding **House Bill No. 5116 An Act Requiring The Creation Of Utility Company Tree-Planting Funds**. The purpose of this bill is to create a tree planting fund administered by United Illuminating ($100,000 annually) and Eversource ($500,000 annually) for tree planting on publicly-owned lands. HB 5116 limits tree plantings to areas where trees had not previously been removed by a telephone, telecommunications or electric distribution company during vegetation management, with funds directed solely to municipalities (e)(f). The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) **supports** the goals of increasing tree canopy cover, but would encourage its focus on neighborhoods most vulnerable to excessive summer heat, an impact projected to increase with a changing climate.[i] DEEP recommends some changes to this proposed bill and stands ready to work with the Committee and others.

Subsection (f) of this bill requires the utilities to distribute the funding in a manner that is proportionate to the scale of tree pruning and removal in each municipality in the previous year. DEEP recommends that this bill focus on tree planting in under resourced and historically overburdened communities, where the greatest benefits will be achieved. Residents of these communities often have the highest energy burden, in terms of the percent of annual income spent on utility costs. At the same time, it is well documented that economically disadvantaged and environmental justice communities in Connecticut are the same communities with the lowest tree canopy cover and the hottest average temperatures.[ii] In Bridgeport and Hartford, urban tree cover (UTC) is just 20% and 26%, respectively.[iii] Even within CT cities with relatively high UTC such as New Haven (38%) low-income neighborhoods have just 23% UTC[iv]. These disparities between income and canopy cover in Connecticut are among the highest in the nation[iii]. The lack of trees providing beneficial shade and improved air quality disproportionally affects these communities, as compared to more affluent neighborhoods.[ii]

While HB 5116 would disallow replanting under utility infrastructure, DEEP supports "right tree right place" principles that promote appropriate tree planting underneath utility infrastructure.[i] DEEP would welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee to consider further refinements to HB 5116. Based on DEEP's experience with administering urban forestry programs, we would propose a few modifications to this bill to help further its aim of planting trees, including:

(1) authorizing funds to be spent on proactive tree maintenance, such as pruning. Data from a subset of Connecticut cities indicates that the high costs of tree removal could be avoided through proactive pruning programs that improve tree health and condition. In addition,

maintenance expenses, such as watering for the first few years, can be critical to the success of a tree planting programs.

(2) clarifying that funds for tree planting can be utilized to create or expand tree pits. Many urban communities lack tree pits or tree pits that are adequate in size, which limits planting locations on public property and contributes to inequities in tree cover.

(3) clarifying that funds can be provided to non-profit partners of municipal governments, which are active in many municipalities in implementing tree planting and urban forestry programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on this proposal. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Harrison Nantz at Harrison.Nantz@ct.gov.

[i] See Governor's Council on Climate Change January 2021 Report, https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DEEP/climatechange/GC3/GC3_Phase1_Report_Jan2021.pdf

[ii] Tree Equity Score

[iil]McDonald, R. I., Biswas, T., Schar, C., Housman, I., Boucher, T. M., Balk, D., Nowak, D., Spotswood, E., Stanley, C. K., Leyk,, S. 2021. The tree cover and temperature disparity in US urbanized areas: Quantifying the association with income across 5,723 communities. PLOS ONE. https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0249715

[iv]Pelletier, KJ. and O'Neil-Dunne, J. https://www.ctdatahaven.org/sites/ctdatahaven/files/NewHaven%20Map%20Tree%20NeighborhoodMetrics%20URI.pdf

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[i] CT Trees and Utilities